

## Strange Parallels of Early Modern Sacredness

Azfar Moin

The University of Texas at Austin

---

DOI: 10.1378/mlt.2018.188

**Abstract:** This essay explores a strange parallel in the way that sovereignty was imagined in early modern South Asia and Europe. At the end of the sixteenth century, when the Mughal emperor Akbar embraced Christian messianic symbols and Catholic icons to make himself the most sacred being on earth, the English playwright Christopher Marlowe used the myth of Akbar's world-conquering ancestor from Inner Asia, Timur or Tamburlaine, to fashion an enduring drama about the ultimate sovereign. The questions why Akbar in India turned to Jesus while Marlowe in England focused on Timur throw new light on the nature of religion and kingship across early modern Eurasia.

The Mughal emperors of India were obsessed with Jesus. They adorned their palaces and tombs with Catholic icons.[1] They titled their queens "Mary." [2] They had their princes tutored by Jesuit priests, who had been invited to the imperial court in the late sixteenth century.[3] In imperial paintings, the emperors had themselves depicted alongside Christ, and sometimes even as Christ.[4] We can imagine the Jesuits' initial elation—and eventual perplexity—at the fervor with which the Mughals, a Sunni Muslim dynasty of Inner Asian origins, embraced the signs of their faith. This was true not only for the "free thinkers" among the Mughals, like Akbar (1556–1605) and Jahangir (1605–1627), but also for the allegedly more "orthodox" ones like Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658). There exists at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., an enigmatic painting in which the builder of the Taj Mahal is marked by a halo linked to the heavens by rays of light (Figure 1).[5] In the light hovers a dove, the Holy Ghost, and above the clouds is God the Father. In place of the Son, though, is Shah Jahan, rendered in perfect profile, the very form of sovereignty.

In a recent book, *The Millennial Sovereign*, I discussed the talismanic use of Christian and European-style art in the messianic self-fashioning of the Mughals, which took place at the end of the first Islamic millennium.[6] I revisit some of these arguments in this exploratory essay, but with a different end in mind. I examine here a strange parallel between the cultural histories of early modern India and England. In the late sixteenth century, while the emperor Akbar, a proud heir of Timur (d. 1405),

was using Christian iconography in his theater of sovereignty, the young Christopher Marlowe was ushering in a new age of theater in Elizabethan England, with a play based on Timur, called *Tamburlaine the Great*.<sup>[7]</sup> Why Akbar embraced “Jesus” in India and why Marlowe was inspired by “Timur” in England are questions that, when considered together, open up a new perspective on the religious and political imagination linking these distant regions. As the essay’s title shows, the analysis here is indebted to *Strange Parallels*, the second volume of Victor Lieberman’s landmark work on early modern Eurasia.<sup>[8]</sup> The nature of this debt will become clear as the different fragments of the argument fall into place. For now, let us begin with a closer look at why the Mughals were drawn to Jesus.



Figure 1: Shah Jahan with Asaf Khan (detail from folio). The late Shah Jahan Album. Painted by Bichitr, c. 1650. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper mounted on paperboard, 36.9 x 25.3 cm. Source: © Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Purchase—Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, S1986.403

Was it all propaganda—a boast that the Mughals of India were holier than the God of the Franks? If so, the question arises: Why Christianity? Would Islamic and Indic symbols not have been more relevant to the Mughals for making such divine assertions? There was not a Christian constituency to speak of in Mughal India, or for that matter, in Iran or Central Asia, the places from which much of the Mughal nobility hailed. And though Jesus and Mary were Islamic figures mentioned in the Quran, their use in the ceremony and pomp of sovereignty was rare in the broader history of Muslim kingship; the staple myths of sacred kingship were those of Solomon, Alexander, and the heroes of the pre-Islamic Iranian epic, the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings).

At first glance, it seems that the Mughals' turn to Jesus occurred in India. The first two Mughal rulers, Babur and Humayun, who had spent more of their lives in Central Asia and Iran, had not marked themselves with Christian signs and names. The process appears to have begun with Akbar and his invitation to the Jesuits in the late 1570s to participate in the religious discussions at his court. And today the matter seems so bizarre that it receives little more than a passing mention in the standard histories of the Mughal empire, and more as cultural marginalia than as serious politics. Art historians have paid the phenomenon greater attention because of the quantity and quality of Catholic-themed images produced at the Mughal court.[9] But, for the most part, besides cataloging and describing this Mughal fixation—and in a few cases making fun of it—the art historical approach only takes us so far in making sense of it.

But make sense of it we must, for it is a trace of the strong cultural link that the Mughals had with Europe. Today we tend to classify the Mughals with the Ottomans, the other "Sunni Muslim" empire of early modern times, and expect the two to reveal synchronized cultural behavior.[10] This, however, is not how history unfolded. While the Ottomans also had a Turkic, nomadic heritage, and borrowed much from the Turkmen and Timurid court cultures of fifteenth-century Iran, by the time they had set up in Istanbul and the Mughals in Delhi and Agra, there was little formal contact between the two dynasties.[11] The Mughals enjoyed greater cultural exchange with the Safavids of Iran, their immediate neighbors, and with their seafaring contemporaries from Western Europe. They considered the Safavids, fellow adherents of Timurid kingly norms, a civilized people. But they thought of the "Franks" as a peculiar maritime tribe, nomads patrolling the seas, whose kings were not wealthy enough to send proper gifts.[12] Thus it is between Iran and Europe that we must search for an answer to the Mughals' mysterious love of Jesus.

Let us turn first to Iran. The early history of the Mughals in the days of the first two dynasts, Babur (r. 1526–1530) and Humayun (r. 1530–1556), is entangled with the rise of the Safavids in Iran. In the first half of the sixteenth century, it was the Safavids who made the Timurid princes of Central Asia and India their clients, and styled themselves as the true successors of Timur (r. 1370–1405), the Mughals' Inner Asian ancestor who had become a major symbol of sovereignty after his conquests swept across nearly all of Asia.[13] Today, the Safavids' suzerainty over the Mughals and their embrace of Timurid norms receives little notice. There are two reasons for this neglect. First, in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Mughals' imperial project in India was so successful that they eclipsed their former Iranian overlords in wealth and power, and staked a viable and independent claim as worthy legatees of Timur. Second, at this time, the Safavids began to impose doctrinal Shi'ism on Iran and thus became known as sectarian devotees of Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam. It is Ali whom the Shi'is consider the rightful heir of his father-in-law and first cousin, the prophet Muhammad, and as leader of all Muslims.

Since the Safavids decreed the conversion of Iran's population to doctrinal Shi'ism, there is good reason to think of them as a quintessential Shi'i dynasty. But such a categorization does not capture the spirit of their first century of rule. As they conquered Iran, the Safavids fashioned their sovereignty around Ali in a mode that was neither doctrinal nor juristic but epic. The Safavids rose to power by enacting a messianic myth of Ali.[14]

The religious climate of fourteenth and fifteenth century Iran and Central Asia was dominated by what scholars call "Alid loyalty," a popular, excessive devotion to Ali, kept alive in oral legends that portrayed him as the perfect saint and warrior. In the aftermath of the social and political dislocations wrought by the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, the region was awash in Sufi movements whose leaders claimed to be the messianic embodiment of Ali. Also prominent in this milieu was a strand of Islamic belief known as *ghulat* or "exaggeration" in which the spiritual guide was venerated as the godhead. In the late fifteenth century, the Safavids had incubated such an exaggerated messianic enterprise in their dynastic shrine in Ardabil in northwestern Iran.[15] Safavid missionary agents recruited Turkmen nomadic tribes willing to fight in the name of the Safavid savior. These soldiers were called the *Qizilbash*, a Turkish word meaning redheads, for the color of the headgear they wore as a sign of their submission to their Safavid leader and "perfect guide" (*murshid-i kamil*). They would go into battle without armor, believing in their saint-king's powers to protect them, and, to prove their devotion, they would reportedly break the strongest of taboos, the consumption of human flesh.[16] In sum, the Safavids in their first century were neither a doctrinally Shi'i group, nor an anomalous sect on the margins of Islam. Rather, they were very much a product of their time insofar as they believed that Ali had been reborn on earth in the form of their king, Shah Isma'il.

The historical process that shaped the Safavids had also played a part in Timur's enactment of sovereignty a century earlier. The great conqueror and his successors had engaged with Alid messianic myths. And in doing so, they had embraced Jesus. The Alid-Jesus messianic myth was inscribed on Timur's epitaph in Samarkand and can be read even to this day.[17] This Arabic inscription was carved on a block of nephrite jade that one of Timur's grandsons had brought from the edge of China to adorn his ancestor's mausoleum. It proclaimed Timur's descent from Alanquva, a mythical Mongol princess, mother of all Mongol sovereigns, who had given miraculous birth to their line of early kings. The birth was miraculous because it was fatherless. In the *Secret History of the Mongols*, composed not long after Chinggis Khan's death in 1227, it was said that the father of Alanquva's sons was a creature who crept like a yellow dog. But this shamanistic detail had evolved by the time of Timur, when the Mongols in Iran and Central Asia had largely converted to Islam. In the Islamized version of the Alanquva story, the Mongol princess was equated with the Mary of the Quran:

And no father was known to this glorious ancestor, but his mother [was] Alanquva. It is said that her character was righteous and chaste, and that “she was not an adulteress” [Quran 19:20]. She conceived her son through a light which came into her from the upper part of a door and “it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man” [Quran 19:17]. And [the light] said that it was one of the sons of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali son of Abu Talib.[18]

In describing the way Alanquva conceived her progeny, the inscription used fragments from the Quranic chapter on Mary, in which the mother of Jesus is visited by an angelic being of light who took human shape. According to the Quran, Jesus was a prophet who was born miraculously without a father. However, the most active role ascribed to Jesus in the Islamic traditions is that of an end-of-time figure, expected to reappear alongside the mahdi (the guided one), an heir of Ali. Timur’s tombstone inscription invoked this apocalyptic expectation when it asserted that the being of light who visited Alanquva’s bedchamber had taken the shape of a descendant of Ali. Thus, by the fifteenth century, the earlier Chinggisid-era animal myth had been replaced with the Islamic messianic one about Jesus and Ali.

All this sounds manifestly absurd today. To make it familiar, we must adjust our thinking or, to paraphrase Peter Brown, rearrange some of our seemingly immovable mental furniture.[19] As Brown had refrained from turning to “popular religion” as an explanation for the rise of the early Christian cult of the saints, we too must not relegate the Alanquva story to the realm of vulgar Mongol belief. After all, it was written on Timur’s tombstone in Arabic, a language of Muslim religious specialists and not the Mongol masses. Thus we must make sense of it within the broader episteme of the time.

First of all, let us imagine how time was experienced in the Timurid era. As Benedict Anderson famously pointed out, our experience of time, the time of the nation, is empty and homogenous. By contrast, the time of the dynastic realm was “messianic . . . a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present.”[20] We may expand on this gnomic insight to suggest that for those who experienced the time of kingship in post-Mongol Iran, such as the readers of Timur’s epitaph or the listeners of Chinggis Khan’s secret history, the yellow dog, Ali, and Jesus served less as metaphors than as metonyms. That is to say, Mongol sovereigns were not simply like these figures—they were these figures. It also implies that for kings, forms of divination and the epic tradition were of more immediate significance than the writing of chronicles. Chronicles were written for later generations, but astrology and epics offered a scheme of action for the present. It was no accident that Timur’s famous title—Sahib Qiran or Lord of Conjunction—was a messianic label he shared with the popular heroes of the epics, such as Abu Muslim, Amir Hamza, and Ali; yet it was an expression derived from the elite science of astrology.[21]

Such a perspective sheds new light on the Safavid and Timurid appropriation of the myth of Ali. Within a few generations after Timur, his progeny had lost the power to



make good on such sovereign claims. This did not prevent them from trying, however. Even a century after Timur, in the reign of the last Timurid ruler of Khurasan, Ali's grave—which was already reputed to exist across Iran and Iraq in Najaf, Kufa, Baghdad, and Rayy—was also “discovered” near Herat and became a site known as Mazar-i Sharif (Noble Shrine), a city now in Afghanistan.[22] The Timurid ruler immediately proclaimed the find a major blessing for his rule and promoted pilgrimage to Ali's shrine as an alternative to hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. But a few years after the king's death, the Safavids took Herat. As they conquered Iran, the Safavids appropriated wholesale the myth and body of Ali. They made their own dynastic shrine in Ardabil an Alid one by linking the genealogy of their eponymous ancestor, Shaykh Safi al-Din, to Ali.[23] And they replaced the Timurids as patrons of the famous shrine in Mashhad of Imam Reza, a descendant of Ali and the eighth Shi'i Imam. At the time, Iran was not Shi'a but the enshrined Imam Reza was venerated as the “sultan of Khurasan,” that is, as the “real” sovereign of the region.[24] A painting from a sixteenth century Book of Omens(falnama), now in the Louvre in Paris, even depicts Imam Reza as an epic hero astride a horse, lance in hand, charging toward a giant demon.[25] This development—that is, the growth in the epic stature of the enshrined Alid saint at Mashhad—had taken place over the fifteenth century under the patronage of the ostensibly Sunni Timurids. But it was the Safavids who transformed the imam's grave into their imperial shrine, merging their sovereign reputation with that of the most famous Alid saint of Iran.

Why is any of this relevant for understanding the Mughal obsession with Jesus? It is relevant because in the sixteenth century the Safavids had taken away from the Timurids the latter dynasty's sovereign link with Ali. But they had left them the symbol of Jesus. When the Mughal emperor Akbar, a direct descendant of Timur, celebrated his grand new empire in India, he chose Jesus and Alanquva to revive his miraculous lineage but left out all mentions of Ali. Thus, in the chronicle of his reign, the Book of Akbar (Akbarnama), Alanquva was once again equated with Mary but the light that penetrated her did not take on the form of a descendant of Ali as it had done in the inscription on Timur's tombstone.

The Book of Akbar states that this divine light,

which took shape, without human instrumentality or a father's loins, in the pure womb of her Majesty Alanquva, after having, in order to arrive at perfection, occupied during several ages the holy bodily wrappings of other holy manifestations, is manifesting itself at the present day, in the pure entity of this unique God-knower and God-worshipper (Akbar).

How many ages have passed away!

How many planetary conjunctions occurred,

That this happy star might come forth from heaven![26]

And so Akbar was born as a Lord of Conjunction, a sovereign like Timur and a messiah like Jesus. His Hindu queen who had born him sons was declared the “Mary

of the Age.” His sons were tutored by Jesuit priests. His court scholars learned Latin to deepen their understanding of Christian scriptures.[27] His artists began to draw iconic Christian scenes, which adorned Mughal gardens, palaces, jewelry, and even tombs.[28]

As a prelude to all of the above, Akbar’s sacred self was unveiled during the millennial celebrations at court, held at the height of his reign in 1582. The episode is commonly known as the inauguration of Akbar’s failed religion, the so-called *Din-i Ilahi* or Divine Religion. But in historical terms it was a successful attempt to raise the body of the king above the distinctions of religion. That it was the end of the first Islamic millennium, a moment of immense messianic expectations, served only to cement the Mughal emperor’s sacred assertions. In preparation, moreover, the Mughal emperor had held discussions among the different sacred traditions of the realm. In these debates, he had openly sided with his Christian guests, the Jesuit priests, who in Akbar’s opinion had gotten the better of their Muslim rivals.[29]

The contest between religions held under the gaze of the Mughal emperor involved much more than sharp arguments based on solemn scripture. When the matter between Islam and Christianity could not be settled by reason, Akbar had proposed a spectacular contest.[30] A great fire would be lit and the Christians would enter the flames with the Bible in their hand, and the Muslims with the Quran. Those in the right would walk out unharmed. Although this ordeal never took place—the sources disagree on whose courage failed—we do know that Akbar was willing to see Muslims and Christians, the Quran and the Bible, burn together.

Such a scene is difficult to imagine today: the simultaneous burning of two holy books and their human bearers in a spectacle arranged for a Muslim king. From where Akbar received the idea of an ordeal by fire—a discussion with a Jesuit priest, the Indic epic *Ramayana*, or his own fertile imagination—is a question that will not detain us here. Rather, the point worth emphasizing is that the Mughal emperor possessed both the power and the will to play with the most sacred symbols of his time. At the turn of the Islamic millennium, he had declared himself a saintly being—not unlike the antinomian mystics of his time—as above the constraints of religion. Transgression—what we would call heresy today—was for holy men like these a path to sacredness, a way to set themselves apart. Akbar was not the only monarch to take this path. He had recent models to follow, such as that of Shah Isma’il of Iran, the Safavid founder, and of his own ancestor, Timur. For these rulers, Islam existed less to be followed and more to be made use of. Religion, especially in the post-Mongol era of Islam, was an instrument of cosmic power for kings, not just a path to salvation. This is perhaps nowhere more applicable than in the case of Timur.

Timur had ruled as a son-in-law of Chinggis Khan and also pretended to be a descendant of Ali. Instead of adhering to one tradition of Islam, he had patronized—or terrorized—them all, while praying in Mongol style to the everlasting sky. His main engagement with Islam was via a mimetic engagement with Sufi saints. Timur did not

build a single madrasa but erected shrines of unprecedented scale for his patron saints.[31] Timur's power over the ulama, the jurists and judges of Islam, was also absolute. Ibn Khaldun, the famous North African judge and intellectual, described how in 1401 he groveled in front of Timur outside the walls of Damascus, a city that the conqueror was about to take and pillage. He had heard what had happened to another eminent judge only a few days before. The man had broken protocol by sitting down without waiting for Timur's instructions. For this mistake, the conqueror had him stripped, cursed, beaten, and dragged around "like a dog." [32] To save himself from such a fate, Ibn Khaldun ingratiated himself by declaring Timur to be the Lord of Conjunction and the prophesied savior.

While Akbar did not aspire to Timur's level of cruelty, he and his heirs certainly saw themselves as enacting the sovereign myth of their ancestor. Timur's conquests across Asia had made him the most successful Muslim conqueror of all time. His success, it was widely believed, did not come from earthly endeavors, but was instead cosmically ordained. Timur remained undefeated until the very end, a sign of being the Sahib Qiran—the Lord of Conjunction. Or we could say, Timur was the Lord of Conjunction and so could not be defeated. Akbar's millennial celebrations were about his conquest of the richest lands of Asia. He too was undefeated, a Lord of Conjunction. His father, Humayun, had danced with joy when he had seen his newborn's horoscope, for it was better than even that of Timur.[33] This meant that Akbar, even more so than Timur, was born to fulfill the destiny of Alanquva's Jesus-like progeny.

At this stage, it is tempting to roll one's eyes at Akbar's pretensions. Lest we give into this temptation, it is important to remember that sacred kingship was first and foremost a performative institution. The myths enacted by monarchs like Akbar were derived not from scriptural religions but from heroic epics—preserved in ancient legends such as the Persian Book of Kings (Shahnama) and in the living memory of world domination by the likes of Timur—that transcended doctrines of salvation and systems of ethics.[34] In this vein, Akbar's embrace of Jesus at the height of his power was the enactment of an epic truth that Timur had also achieved: that the emperor was the most sacred being on earth and above the distinctions of religion.

Akbar's grand performance was most ably captured and rationalized by the emperor's court savant, Abul Fazl, who composed the voluminous Book of Akbar. In this masterpiece of history and hagiography, the courtier depicted his master as the "perfect man," the *insan-i kamil* of Sufi metaphysics, who maintained the balance of the cosmos.[35] But this was more than just a mystical concept. The universal cosmology of the perfect man was an esoteric one, erected upon the Hermetical cabbalistic foundations of 'ulum-ghariba, the occult sciences—what we would today call "magic." [36]

In early modern India and Iran, the occult sciences were thought to derive from Hermes, the "Thrice Great" or "Triplicate in Wisdom," an antediluvian sage identified with the biblical Enoch and the Quranic Idris. By early modern times Hermes was



considered a prophetic figure of great interest to those pursuing an “eternal truth” in the form of a unified cosmology and chronology that transcended religious difference.[37]Hermes was also believed to be the first prophet to whom the science of the stars was revealed. Even the Book of Akbar declared that it was Hermes who “guided men to the reverence of the Great Light (the sun).”[38] Thus the sun became central to Mughal kingship—in the imperial veneration (darshan) ceremony, in the initiation of royal devotees (murids), and even in the rituals prescribed for the commander-in-chief (sipah salar) of the Mughal army.[39] None of this was peculiar to Akbar. His father, Humayun, had also organized his courtly space and rituals around alchemical and astrological principles.[40] In short, Hermetical knowledge pervaded Mughal culture and shaped the imperial cosmology of the perfect man.

However, here we find ourselves at an impasse. Despite his centrality to the occult traditions of such use to Muslim saints and kings, the place of Hermes in the social and religious history of early modern India and Iran remains to be properly studied.[41] Kevin Van Bladel’s recent and excellent study, *The Arabic Hermes* is the only book-length work on the topic. But its focus is on early textual traditions, not social or cultural history. To learn more about this ancient sage, we must turn to Renaissance Europe where Hermetic philosophy and magic was rife. Over the last century, Hermeticism in Europe has been studied widely across the disciplines; in fact, some in Renaissance studies would consider Hermeticism and the place of related occult traditions a *passé* matter, exhaustively explored by the 1980s.[42] This may be so as far as scholarship on Europe is concerned, but it is time for a fresh look at Hermes from a global and transcultural perspective. Indeed, one could argue that what the perfect man was to Mughal India, the Renaissance magus was to early modern Europe. But when we turn to Europe to learn about Hermetical ideals, what do we find? We come face to face with Timur performing on the Elizabethan stage.

At the end of the sixteenth century, during Akbar’s millennial celebrations, the English theater was entering its mature phase, soon to be ruled over by William Shakespeare. But the play that cleared the path for Shakespeare and launched the high era of Elizabethan drama was *Tamburlaine the Great*. Written by the young Christopher Marlowe in two parts, the first of which was performed around 1587, the play was a riotous success, and inspired a slew of “Turkish” dramas based on Muslim characters.[43] *Tamburlaine*’s plot was simple—in fact, one could say there was no plot at all. But the protagonist was mesmerizing. As a lowborn Scythian who rises to power over all of Asia, *Tamburlaine* is unstoppable. He wins all battles, defeats all foes, and takes all their women. He yokes defeated kings to his chariot and orders the slaughter of captured virgins. He declares himself the scourge of God, but also taunts the heavens. Although cruel beyond imagination and blasphemous beyond belief, *Tamburlaine* is immensely attractive—a sublime figure. In short, Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* was not a meditation on the human condition but an epic of human self-assertion enacted on a cosmic scale.

Although the play brought him renown, it also landed Marlowe in trouble. The reason was the playwright's attitude toward religion. Consider the scene in which Tamburlaine spurns his religion, Islam, and orders the Quran to be burned:

Now, Casane, where's the Turkish Alcoran,  
And all the heaps of superstitious books  
Found in the temples of that Mahomet,  
Whom I have thought a god? They shall be burnt.

...

In vain, I see men worship Mahomet:  
My sword hath sent millions of Turks to hell,  
Slain all his priests, his kinsmen, and his friends,  
And yet I live untouched by Mahomet.  
Now Mahomet, if thou have any power,  
Come down thyself and work a miracle:  
Thou art not worthy to be worshipped,

...

Seek out another Godhead to adore,  
The God that sits in Heaven, if any God;  
For he is God alone, and none but he. (Part II, Act 5)[44]

Today, in post-Rushdie England, the Quran-burning scene is often left out when the play is performed. But the ire Marlowe faced at the time came not from Muslims, who were rare in Elizabethan England and of little public concern. It was the Christian establishment that was appalled by the portrayal of a sovereign who taunted not only Islam and its prophet but, it seemed, organized religion itself.[45] They suspected Marlowe of being an atheist, a dangerous charge that condensed together criminality, treason, and heresy—what Stephen Greenblatt terms “a cultural conceit, the recurrent fantasy of the archcriminal as atheist.”[46]

Why would Marlowe take such risks? As a spy, a lover of men, and a freethinker, Marlowe lived close to the boundaries of social acceptability. He also seemed possessed, as Greenblatt put it, by a “will to absolute play,” a restless creativity that drove him to set unsayable questions at the heart of his plays.[47] Marlowe's urge to whisper the public secret was perhaps the secret of his theatrical success. But, ultimately, such a transgressive attitude toward life and literature cost him. He died at twenty-nine of a knife blow above the eye. The official reason was a scuffle among friends over a bill at an inn, but as Shakespeare, his more cautious contemporary, remarked in *As You Like It*, it was “a great reckoning in a little room.”

There is no dearth of scholarship or imaginative literature on Marlowe. In fact, far more is written on Marlowe and his *Tamburlaine* than on the historical Timur. However, the question of Marlowe's attitude toward religion and his disdain for scriptural truth remains unsettled. Some dismiss the frenzied assertions of his *Tamburlaine* as mere flights of fancy while others see the character as a herculean hero

in the guise of an errant Muslim barbarian.[48] Yet there is a consensus that at the heart of Marlowe's Tamburlaine is a "dark playfulness,"[49] a tendency—which was rather Akbar-like—to flirt with the limits of his culture. For instance, in his famous play Doctor Faustus, Marlowe had the lead character conjure a devil on stage—a feat of some boldness given that one could be burned at the stake for trying it at home. So what exactly was Marlowe's goal in staging Tamburlaine in all his cruel and blasphemous glory?

In a perceptive, but much ignored study, Marlowe, Tamburlaine, and Magic, published in 1976, James Howe argued that Marlowe was enacting via the character of Tamburlaine the Renaissance ideal man—the magus:

This then is the strange parallel between the histories of early modern England and India. And it is doubly strange if we compare the historiography of the two regions. Historical, art historical, and literary studies on Hermeticism and sacred kingship in Christian Europe are too many to read. Yet the actual enactment of the Hermetical myth was in Muslim India, Iran, and Central Asia. Where kings were considered divine, we have hesitated to study them as such. Instead, we have marked them as deviant. Where kings were relatively mundane—constrained by the church and the rising bourgeoisie—we have gone out of the way to study their sacred qualities, their ability to cure scrofula and the nature of their two bodies. On the scale of Eurasian history, scholarship seems to be out of tune with the sources. Howe's argument would have rung truer had it been made about the historical Timur and his descendants in India than about Marlowe's Tamburlaine, but we have not even begun to try. What better way to provincialize Europe if we did.

#### Works Cited

Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak. *A'in-i Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann, vol. 1. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873.

Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Henry Beveridge. *The Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl: History of the Reign of Akbar Including an Account of His Predecessors*. 3 (1 and 2 bound in one) vols. Calcutta: 1897–1921. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005.

Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Ghulam Riza Tabatabai'i Majd. *Akbarnamah: Tarikh-i Gurakaniyan-i Hindi*. Tehran: Mu'assasah-'i Mutala'at va Tahqiqat-i Farhangi (Pizhuhishgah), 1372 (1993 or 1994).

Aigle, Denise. "Les Transformations d'un Mythe d'Origine: L'Exemple de Gengis Khan et de Tamerlan." *Revue de Mondes Musulmans et de Méditerranée* 89–90 (2000): 151–68.

Alam, Muzaffar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. "Frank Disputations: Catholics and Muslims in the Court of Jahangir." *Indian Economic Social History Review* 45(4) (2009): 457–511.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of*

- Nationalism, rev. and extended ed. London: Verso, 1991.
- Arjomand, Said Amir. "Religious Extremism (ghuluww), Sufism and Sunnism in Safavid Iran: 1501–1722." *Journal of Asian History* 15 (1981): 1–35.
- Arnaldez, R. "Al-Insan al-Kamil." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2012, available at [formerly [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-insan-al-kamil-COM\\_0375?s.num=1&s.q=al-Insan+al-Kamil](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-insan-al-kamil-COM_0375?s.num=1&s.q=al-Insan+al-Kamil)].
- Babayan, Kathryn. *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Bailey, Gauvin Alexander. *The Jesuits and the Grand Mogul: Renaissance Art at the Imperial Court of India, 1580–1630*. Occasional Papers. Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1998.
- Bashir, Shahzad. "Shah Isma'il and the Qizilbash: Cannibalism in the Religious History of Early Safavid Iran." *History of Religions* 45(3) (2006): 234–56.
- Bellah, Robert N. *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Borchardt, Frank L. "The Magus as Renaissance Man." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 21(1) (1990): 57–76.
- Brown, Peter. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Casale, Giancarlo. *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.